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... wood, carved by the knife of circumstance ...?

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Abstract

“... wood carved by the knife of circumstance...”?: Cape Rapists and Rape in South Africa, c. 1910-1980, interrogates the notion that rapists are a product of an inherent nature and/or are nurtured by their environments to commit acts of rape. It also attempts to contextualise the changing definitions, motivations, justifications, and rationalisations given by theorists, politicians, jurists, the medical profession, society, communities, families, rape victims, and rapists. The central thesis questions, a slight adaptation from that of Joanna Bourke, are: “who were the rapists in the Cape?”, “why did they do what they did?” and “how particular are they to the Cape?” By contextualizing existing studies on rape with the accounts within the rich primary archives, Cape rapists are not merely located, defined, and explained, but are also contextualized within broader South African and global categories of rapists in what unfolds as a history of contested (and sometimes competing) notions of consensual sex, sexuality, and non-consensual sexual violence.